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## THE PERSONALITY OF HAWTHORNE.\*

BY WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

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MR. JULIAN HAWTHORNE can hardly be thanked enough for the quite unembarrassed frankness of his dealing with those simpler and closer details of his father's life which embody a man's personality to his acquaintance, and, if he is a great man, extend and transmit the notion of it to strangers in the remoteness of time and space. He has done his work so faithfully and so fully in the constantly interesting volume, "Hawthorne and his Circle," that there are chances it will remain the favorite life of our incomparable romancer out of all the lives that have been or that shall be written. As the author has it from time to time on his conscience to remind us, the book is not a study of Hawthorne's work; it is scarcely a study of Hawthorne's character; it is so little a premeditated or intentional analysis of his method or his mind that it has none of the offensive or defensive qualities of a criticism; but it is a picture of one of the most fascinating and important literary men who ever lived, as his own family knew him, and as the lovers of his books will be glad to know him, among the friends he made. He is by no means posed as the centre of his circle; and it cannot be said that his friends or his casual acquaintance are introduced at any moment for the set purpose of lighting his figure up, or throwing a contrasting shade upon it. But since he is there among them, we cannot help having the advantage of their personalities in rendering his more intelligible.

Next to making him so clear and appreciable, it seems to me that the most valuable office of Mr. Julian Hawthorne's book is the admirable illustration, both conscious and unconscious, of Hawthorne's period. The most trivial of these fond records con-

\* Hawthorne and his Circle. By Julian Hawthorne. Illustrated. New York and London: Harper & Brothers.

tributes to the effect. The boy, growing up beside the man, and having his hand so often both literally and figuratively in his father's hand, had yet such an objective sense of the environment as his elder could not have, for all the vastness of his scope, and the keenness of his vision. His look was necessarily an inlook, and it is the outlook which Mr. Julian Hawthorne makes the future his debtor in supplying. When Mr. Horace Mann, Hawthorne's brother-in-law, finds him smoking, and in the relentless zeal of a reformer tells him he can never feel quite the same towards him thereafter, Hawthorne has a thoroughly humorous pleasure in the renunciation, but Mr. Julian Hawthorne, together with this, brings the complexity of a more sophisticated time to the puritanic fact and gives it entire significance in our atmosphere. Against the softer, if not wider, horizons of our later day, he lets us see it in all its rigid grotesqueness, its inflexible absurdity, in which also there is a kind of reason. I remember, or I think I remember, reading somewhere in Dr. Holmes, possibly in an "Autocrat" paper, but more likely elsewhere, his confession, his most tolerant and kindly yet scrupulous confession, of the personal judgment he tacitly passed upon a young man whom he saw reading "Don Juan," as if that young man, because of his indulgence in such literature, could not be quite what the friend of young men could wish him to be. We have gone far since then, and whether we smoked or read "Don Juan" or not ourselves, we should hardly renounce or condemn those who did, in ever so slight a measure. There remains, of course, the question whether New England civilization was the more excellent or enviable in its flowering or in its going to seed.

## I.

Hawthorne was most distinctly of this civilization, as much when he was out of it as when he was in it. He saw a great deal of the world, but wherever he went, or wherever he stayed, he carried the hated Salem of 1850 with him, and helplessly kept it about him. He was not less a New-Englander but more for being the sort of Antipuritan always at the heart of Puritanism in the home and realm it found for itself in the New World; and when he visited the Old World, or, as it seemed, revisited the Old World, he brought with him for its interpretation and judgment the very criterions and measures against which he himself re-

belled in his native air. He was in the best sense, in the sense that a child is so, immensely primitive, primitive quite beyond simplicity, and though he came to know a great commercial capital like Liverpool, a great social and political capital like London, an historical and æsthetical capital like Rome, it was with such involuntary reserves as kept him still ethically a citizen if not a denizen of Salem. He was a very good man, a man as pure in life as in thought, but he was primitively bad as well as primitively good, and he gave way at times to his resentments with something like an aboriginal singleness of heart; at other times he retained his grudges with rather a relentless rancor, though he might not nourish them by retaliation. He mellowed with the years, as men commonly do, but always he was a man of primitive feeling, which sometimes he indulged and sometimes he did not indulge. It is known how quite mercilessly he mocked the old fogies of the Salem Custom-house in his introduction to "The Scarlet Letter," and I recall how a Salem lady, to whom I confided, on my first visit to the place, that I had been wearing out the sandal-shoon of a young Western pilgrim in looking up the several shrines of Hawthorne's genius, said she knew a girl who would like to poison him because of such of these mockeries as touched her ancestors. There was, in fact, no love lost between Hawthorne and his birthplace, but probably neither knew how much was their mutual debt. If he conferred deathless renown upon her, with something very like a cuff, she had begun by endowing him from the stores of her deep puritanic past with a strong nature which could emerge from its shy withdrawal, on occasion, in forays of scorn and hate. There yet remains to be born any American more American than Hawthorne, or more expressive of the potent original qualities which the English race in its transplantation sucked up from the wild soil of the New World, or drank in from its tingling air. I should be sorry to oversay my sense of all this, and sorry that it should carry to the reader the notion of anything fierce or malign in the man whose history could be told in the last detail, without showing him other than habitually good and kind, as he was invariably duteous and true.

## II.

Mr. Julian Hawthorne shows no disposition to flatter the facts of his father's more intimate life, by which he lets us know him

as the heart of his home, wherever the home might be, whether in the quaint old Salem house, which I never found; in the farm cottage in Lenox; in the Wayside at Concord; in the various English lodgings and boarding-houses; in the hotels of Paris, Rome, and Florence. We learn to know him familiarly, in his son's report of him, and we see him with eyes which we trust as our own. The boy first saw him at the desk where he was always writing, as it seemed, in a long dressing-gown and slippers down at the heels: "a tall, strong man, whose wide-domed head was covered with wavy black hair, bushing out at the sides. . . . Under heavy, dark eyebrows were eyes deep-set and full of light, marvellous in range of expression, with black eyelashes. *All seemed well with me when I met their look,*" Mr. Hawthorne adds, with a touch that goes to the heart both for his father and for himself. He recalls his father as broad-shouldered and deep-chested, and nearly six feet tall; "his legs and feet were slender and graceful, his gait long and springy, and he could stand and leap as high as his shoulder." He had "a mechanical talent," and he made the children amusing toys, and after they got into the country at Lenox, he taught them his love of the woods and fields; he would call out to them to hide their eyes, "and the next moment, from being there beside us on the moss, we would hear his voice descending from the skies, and behold! he swung among the topmost branches, showering down upon us a hail-storm of nuts." He went sledding with them, and coasted floundering down among the drifts, and he joined them in their snow-fights. He believed that the country was best in winter, but, after all, he did not like Lenox, for he was not well there. Wherever he was, he was the good comrade of his children, but their guide, philosopher and friend, as well as their playmate. He watched them carefully, though tacitly, and it is only in the retrospect that his son is aware how much his father's fellowship was educative. He was still, and more and more as he grew older, his father's companion, who, in their walks about the Liverpool neighborhoods, would occasionally drop "some half-playful, imaginative remark, calculated to make me realize the situation that was so vividly present to himself. His thoughts, however deep, were always ready to break into playfulness outwardly. . . . He was somewhat solicitous, I suspect, to check in his son any tendency towards mere poetical sentiment," says Mr. Hawthorne, and he most importantly adds, "His

own imaginative faculty was rooted in common sense." As consul at a large seaport his official life was largely passed "with all varieties of scamps and mendicants, fools and desperadoes, and all the tribe of piratical cutthroats which in those days constituted a large part of the mercantile marine." Yet he rather throve in his occupation; he became interested in it; "there was a practical side of him which took hold of the business in man-fashion, and transacted it so efficiently as to leave no room for criticism," though it remained "inveterately objective" with him, and "the only feature of it that quickened a responsive chord in him was the revelation of the intolerable condition of the sailors in many of our ships," which he dwelt upon in his despatches to the State Department.

In the Liverpool suburb where the Hawthornes lived, fifty years ago, the people "were dull, ignorant, selfish, material, conventional; they were hospitable on conventional lines, they were affable and even social, so long as you did not awaken their prejudice." With them, "England was the best of all countries, and the English the leading nation of the world," but they had never heard of Tennyson or Browning. Yet "the impact against such a clay wall" rather amused and interested Hawthorne, "and even won a good deal upon his sympathies. He loved the solid earth as well as the sky above it, and he was glad of the assurance that such people existed, though he might be devoutly thankful that two hundred years of America had opened so impassable a gulf between him and them. . . . Of course they had never read his books; literary cultivation was not to be found in England lower down than the gentleman class." So, "he was never obliged to say 'I am glad you liked it' to them," and that was a bond of friendship in itself. This dense atmosphere, if peculiarly favorable to Hawthorne's habitual withdrawal into an air of his own, formed no temptation to pass the bounds of the home circle which he loved best of all. Mr. Hawthorne intimates more than once how seriously, yet how humorously and playfully, he lived in his children. He was glad whenever his son detected the "mawkish taint in literature or life," and the boy "breathed a manly, robust and bracing atmosphere in his company." Among the various people whom this simple, strong and wise soul came in touch with, he was peculiarly fond of the old skippers, as Fields noted in Boston, before Hawthorne had entered into official rela-

tions with them in Liverpool, and had come to dwell with them in the same boarding-house. Mr. Hawthorne says they were shy of his consular dignity at first, but quickly reconciled themselves to his good-fellowship over a game of euchre and the accompanying tobacco. "No one took liberties with him, and he took none with anybody; yet there was no trace, in his intercourse, of stiffness or pose. . . . On the other hand, he obviously elevated the tone of our little society; the stout captains, who feared nothing else, feared their worserselves in his presence. None of them knew or cared a straw for his literary genius or productions, but they were aware of something in him which they liked and respected."

One of the most significant things which Mr. Hawthorne notes in his father is that sort of duality, or plurality, by which a superior man loves several things the best. The reader of "Our Old Home" need not be reminded of the frank distaste with which Hawthorne spoke of many things in England and the English which he disliked; yet, when he left them for his Continental journeys and sojourns "he began to be conscious of discomfort which was only partly bodily or sensible. An unacknowledged homesickness afflicted him—an Old Homesickness rather than a yearning for America. He may have imagined that it was America that he wanted, but when at last we returned there he still looked back towards England. As an ideal, America was still and always foremost in his heart. . . . America might be his ideal home, but his real home was England, and thus he found himself, in the end, with no home at all outside of the boundaries of his domestic circle."

The like happened with a man so unlike Hawthorne as Lowell, so unlike even in their common New Englandry; with both, in their passion for America, their affection was ultimately for England. Both were deeply domesticated men, as only Americans can be, and with both their own roof-tree became their sole country, their *patria*. The effect made itself felt in the homelessness Hawthorne experienced outside of his family in the streets of Paris, where many things gave him pause. It is not altogether humorously that Mr. Hawthorne notes that though his father "enjoyed the French cookery, he was in some doubt whether it were not a snare of the evil one to lure men to indulgence." He felt keenly the cold of warm countries, which one cannot escape

as one can the cold of cold countries, and both in Paris and Rome, his suffering from it disabled his sense of beauty in the world of art to which he was so alien by all his tradition: the naked women statues and pictures seemed to him repulsively indecent, and it was not till the weather grew milder that he was able partially to judge them æsthetically. In fact, he never reached the unmorality of the classic standard; architecture suffered with sculpture and painting in his censure, but of course not so severely, and he entered his judgments in the diary he kept with a savage sincerity. "These are the iconoclasms of the Goth and Vandal," Mr. Hawthorne says after citing some of the censures, "at their first advent to Rome. They remained to alter their mood, and so did my father," but it is questionable whether he was ever quite at peace with the things which he first required to prove their innocence. If he did not reconcile himself to the æsthetics of Latin civilization, still less did he yield to its ethics. When it came to affairs of right and wrong, no matter how trivial, he was inflexible, and the departure of the family from Rome was celebrated by a scene of melodrama such as ensues in Italian countries when the *forestiere* makes a virtue of resistance to imposition. The Hawthornes had a worthless little maidservant, Lalla, whose tribe wished to levy tribute for all the things she had left undone, and appeared with her at the last moment to urge her claim. "'No!' said my father, and 'No!' said my mother, like the judges of the Medes and Persians," and then Lalla and her tribe tried what cursing would do. "I think my father would not have yielded had the salvation of Rome and all Italy depended upon it." Apt enough to make liberal bargains, he was "absolutely incorruptible when anything like barefaced robbery was attempted."

Hawthorne liked Florence better than Rome, and would willingly have settled there for the rest of his life. He met people he liked there, rather more than in Rome, and he was especially friends with Powers, the sculptor, a man much more important and interesting than the best of the things he did, and these were better, taking their time into account, than people are now willing to allow. The two were congenial in the vein of mysticism which allied their equally primitive natures. It was the moment when the raps of spiritualism were shaking mankind, "and Powers was pregnant with the marvels which he had either seen or heard of and which he always tried to explain on some philosophical



ground. My father would listen to it all, and both believe it and not believe it," for he too had experienced strange overtures from the occult, in mysterious sounds and touches, if not sights. Hawthorne was in fact not the man to refuse such advances, as he was not the man to invite them, and they appealed to the common sense of his strong practical nature with the same claim upon his recognition as any every-day incident. He deeply felt, as every man of common sense must feel, that material things are not the only realities; that they are perhaps the least real among realities.

### III.

In this summary of the various aspects of Hawthorne as he is shown in his son's book, the reader of it will easily see that I have not done the book itself justice, and my defence is that I am not here attempting that. I might otherwise have something to say both in praise and in blame of the fashion of its doing; I might insinuate that there were errors of taste and errors of judgment in the record, and yet I do not know that if pushed to the wall I should say there was anything I would have left out. Concerning each debatable point, I can fancy myself yielding it to the author, and upon the whole thanking him for having committed just that error, since all he says tends to a fulness of knowledge concerning Hawthorne. Even where the errors do *not* apparently concern him, they really concern him, for in the excess with which some of his circle seem presented, we have the more abundant material for imagining the man who perennially interests, and, humanly speaking, will eternally interest the lover of literature. In this study of Hawthorne's environment, the obscure or obscurer figures of his circle are no more slighted for the more famous figures by the son than the father slighted them. The two Hawthornes are alike in the essential democracy that finds human nature always important, and the reader in the measure of his own genuineness will share their pleasure in the simpler and plainer folks whom they touched, the father in his life, and the son in his record of it. It is by no means part of the rising man's good fortune that his rise eliminates him from the common level, and after one has satisfied in a measure the appetite for celebrities, one would rather have gone on hearing about such of his acquaintance as have not been otherwise heard of. But there are abundant celebrities in the book, whom Mr. Hawthorne

sketches in their relation to Hawthorne with the same frankness that he uses with Hawthorne himself. A man of Hawthorne's approved greatness, such as he was after "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Blithedale Romance" made him known, could not dwell in Concord, in Liverpool, in London, in Paris, in Rome, in Florence, without being sought out and found out in whatever remoteness he tried to guard, by all sorts of distinguished people; and this duly happened with Hawthorne everywhere, except perhaps in Salem, where he never personally lived after he became known. Thanks to their inevitable occurrence we have a multitude of such figures in "Hawthorne and his Circle." But Hawthorne himself was easily the first figure of the circle, no matter who entered it, not because the terms of the book are that he should be so, but because it is doubtful whether he ever met a greater man than himself, in America, or England, or Italy. It is remarkable how positive his greatness as an artist is, in spite of the delicacy and sometimes the thinness of his art. The wonderful flower of his talent glowed in this workaday air with a holiday splendor, that was by no means merely relative; in Longfellow alone had he any competitor or rival in art, and their kinds were so different, that they did not apparently vie with each other. All that straw, however, has long since been many times thrashed out, and I did not intend even to touch it, in my wish to see Hawthorne as a man by the light freshly thrown upon him. It does not strike me that any one will see him in this newly so much as anew. Here he is what he always was; and yet, since there has been rather more than enough insistence on those easier means of judgment which have delivered him to the imagination as shy, cold, severe, and quaint, I have been glad of the facts which embody a larger and kindlier and juster conception of him. I do not know why he should seem singular in being so simple, and kind, and faithful in all those relations of life in which literary celebrities have sometimes not excelled, for certainly he is only of the American average in this. What strikes me first and last in him is how entirely American he always was. He epitomizes the effect of American history on its domestic and civic side, if he does not epitomize that history itself.

I remember once the graphic Tom Appleton, who used to say so many of the good things said in Boston, saying that Hawthorne "looked like a boned pirate," and I remember also the grave dis-

pleasure with which Longfellow heard the phrase when repeated to him by one who was perhaps too great a lover of phrases. No doubt the poet, who was Hawthorne's lifelong friend, felt the subtle injustice which a certain aptness in the saying did the man whose gloomy presence expressed the ancestral as well as the individual personality. It is not for nothing that his forefathers lived two hundred years in the Puritan atmosphere of New England, and were judges of witches before they went down to the sea in ships. Yet Hawthorne was not only a man of the past, but a man of the present. If he did not feel the tremendous wave of optimism that swept New England to a greater height of goodness than any other land has known, he knew the sweetness of living simply, purely, nobly. The evil that men too often do became for him merely the problem for a darkling imagination, and the passions yielded him the secret of their most tragical significance without first making him their prey.

## IV.

Here at the end I find myself with the wish to say something of Hawthorne which I must say, if at all, in apparent contradiction of some things I began by saying. I will venture upon them with what courage I may, and leave the reader to strike the balance of truth.

All the forming days of his years he dwelt in his native and ancestral New England, but he was in it, not of it, so far as its more ostensible passions and aspirations were concerned; though it would be so hard to say what other land or people he was more of that it would be easier to suppose him of some origin and substance not affected by the motives of his fellowmen anywhere. In a sort this was literally true of him. He was poor and unworldly, yet he prospered through straits all but dire to fame and competence by his helpless constancy to a high ideal of literature, which, as his son attests, was the fine flower of his common sense, and as every lover of his books can witness was in nowise transcendental. He was a Brook-Farmer, but amidst communistic dreamers he preserved a skeptical allegiance to the old order apparently so unfriendly to himself. While all the best minds and natures about him were stirred to the noble abhorrence of slavery, he not ignobly held aloof from the strain and stress of that period of impassioned politics, and kept pure the artistic

soul from those public ethics which penetrated even the æsthetic privacy where Longfellow dwelt apart if not alone. When the great war came, he indeed found himself in enmity to secession, but as much critically amused as impassioned in his patriotism. The religious change which passed over New England did not leave him Puritan in creed, for that he had never been, but neither did it make him over in the likeness of the newer saints who soared or rested in an optimistic faith in the perfectibility and early perfection of human society. However little of the past he formally was, he was quite as little formally of the present; those who were in no haste to accept his retarded condemnation of the South in the war against the Union could not have dealt more severely with him than I heard, in my first years at Boston, an eminent Unitarian minister deal with him for what he considered his libel of the New England Puritan clergy in venturing to imagine the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and his dark history possible to any man of his cloth.

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.